All for the Answer: A Nation of Unrelenting Skeptics

By Ward Sinclair
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It is, as Harold Weisberg wrote in the first of his seven books on the murder of John F. Kennedy, a story like none other in our history.

With its disconcerting undertone of morbid compulsion, it has made us all a nation of G-men and, more, a nation of unrelenting skeptics.

All for the answer.

All for the answer, the Gallup Poll reports, half of us disbelieve the Warren Commission conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone as the assassin.

All for the answer, a disbelieving Congress sets out to conduct its own inquiry into the curious contradictions that continue to fuel the disbelief.

All for the answer, as could happen only in America, it has spawned a lucrative school of commercial revisionism and a cadre of media heroes who savor what we ask and tell us what we don't dare to know.

So yesterday, 14 years after that day in Dallas, the FBI responded to the endemic skepticism and doubt and turned loose 40,001 documents from the assassination file that hitherto had been secreted in the bureau's eyes-only repository.

There will be more to come next month — something like 40,000 more documents from the archives — as the FBI, in its way, answers some 50 requests for data filed under the Freedom of Information Act.

The cache of documents released by the FBI after editing and cleansing is massive: 279 bound volumes of raw data in 12 cardboard cartons.

If the task for assembling the material was formidable, which it was, both in terms of cost ($187,000) and long man-hours at the FBI, equally imposing was the exercise of digestion.

The media and the public did the best they could to cope with an avalanche of data that, by dint of volume and incongruity, at least defied quick and easy digestion.

In a first-floor reading room at its J. Edgar Hoover headquarters building, the FBI provided space for perusers of the documents. Three research analysts, headed by William Shackleford, who spent the last 18 months assembling the documents, stood by to help.

Our collective thirst for answers nothwithstanding, there was not a land-office atmosphere at the FBI reading room. Maybe—and there were those who said so—it was that the skepticism runs too deep for most to bother with expurgated revelation.

Reporters and researchers sat elbow-to-elbow at long tables in the classroom-like space and pored over the papers, searching for most knew not what.

Shackleford stood next to the six tall file cabinets, where the fruit of his search reposed, and expressed a thought:

"I think it all will point to the same conclusion—that Oswald was the lone assassin."

John Geddie was a reporter in Dallas when Kennedy was slain. Yesterday, as a Washington correspondent for The Dallas Morning News, he sat at the table and studied volume after volume from Shackleford's cabinets.

"I'm mainly looking for things to check out later," Geddie said. "But the volume of information gives a good indication of the amount of work that was done by the FBI."

By midday, after a full morning at his work, Geddie had found little that would be helpful. Rather, he said, echoing others in the room, he was more curious about what the FBI had not included in the collection.

Behind him sat Priscilla Johnson McMillan, an associate at Harvard's Russian Research Center, who "lived with it for 13 years" before publishing "Marina and Lee," the story of the Oswalds.

"I'm looking for what, I don't know," she said. "I'm looking for things that do not show up in the full report of the Warren Commission."

Her pickings were slim. "No big sensations so far," she said. "But the big thing is to find out how much is still classified."

Near her were four researchers from the Assassination Information Bureau (AIB), a group that calls itself, in the phrase of Jeff Goldberg, "the eyes and ears for the people who can't come here."

Goldberg, a director of the group, and his aides were compiling an item-by-item index of the FBI material. "The key to all of this is what's not in the documents," he said. "My hunch is that 10 per cent of this may be worth rereading and studying. But

we're taking a wait-and-see attitude."

He complained that AIB and ordinary citizens who have a need to see the documents are crippled by the cost. At 10 cents a page, the FBI was charging $4,000.10 for a complete set of the first documents.

AIB has asked the FBI to provide a cost-free set of documents as a public service. The bureau hasn't answered.

Cost was less of a factor for the large news-gathering organizations which mobilized and teamed up with each other to attempt the challenging mission of digesting the mass for deadline distribution.

The Associated Press, United Press International and NBC News each purchased its own set of documents. Newsday, the Long Island daily, bought a set and shared with other papers.

The Washington Post purchased a set, opened a ninth-floor conference room and, with reporters from other outlets joining in, put a team of readers to work to ferret out the new, the revealing, the fresh.

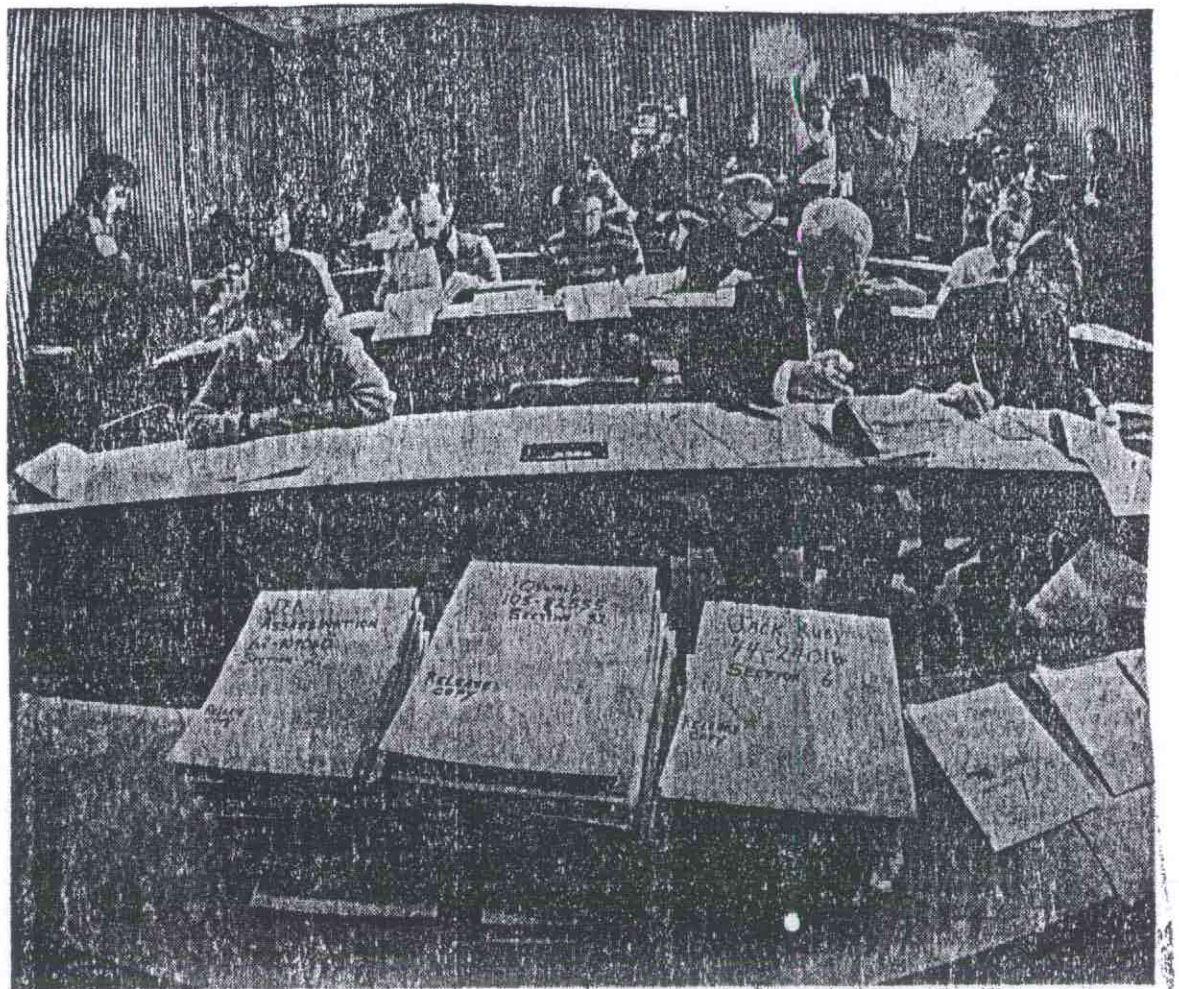
All for the answer, they found on page after page, a voluminous record of FBI investigation, very often down trails of disbelief, chasing tips from cranks and drunks and pieces of a puzzle that beguiled and misled.

And through it all, the soaring personna of J. Edgar Hoover, responding to the tipsters, neatly brushing off the kooks, thanking loyal and skeptical Americans for their concern.

Here, a Missouri boy urging examination of the contents of Oswald's stomach. There, a purported Oswald crony in Paris offering information for $4,000 and two plane tickets to Portugal.

Now, a man in Argentina whose studies in "spiritism" gave him names and faces in Dallas. Then, memos from C. D. DeLoach, Hoover's right-hand man, fretting and warning about leaks in the investigation.

Harold Weisberg, a sort of father figure of the skeptics and the disbelievers, didn't even bother yester-



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Reporters read through documents released yesterday by the FBI on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.